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ABSTRACT

The Dakota or Sioux people may well be the best known of all the nations which first lived in North America. Tribal members gave themselves the name Dakota, meaning friends. Their Minnesota neighbors called them by a long name meaning enemy. French traders in the 1600s took the last part of the name and wrote it down as Sioux. Since then, they have been known by both names. In the late 1600s many Dakota people lived in the northern forests and along the Upper Mississippi. By the late 1700s, all Dakota had moved from their original forest homes in northern Minnesota. The tribe formed three big divisions: Eastern Dakota, comprised of four Santee bands, migrated to southern Minnesota; Middle Dakota, comprised of two bands (Yankton and Yanktonai), moved to southern North Dakota and southern South Dakota; and Western Dakota, comprised of seven Teton bands, migrated as far west as the current states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. Because the three big Dakota divisions had made their homes in different kinds of country, their lifestyles changed. The booklet describes the lifestyles of each, including their housing, clothing, family life, child rearing practices, and other cultural traditions. (AH)

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Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.
GOPHER HISTORIAN
Leaflet Series NO 5

The DAKOTA or SIOUX

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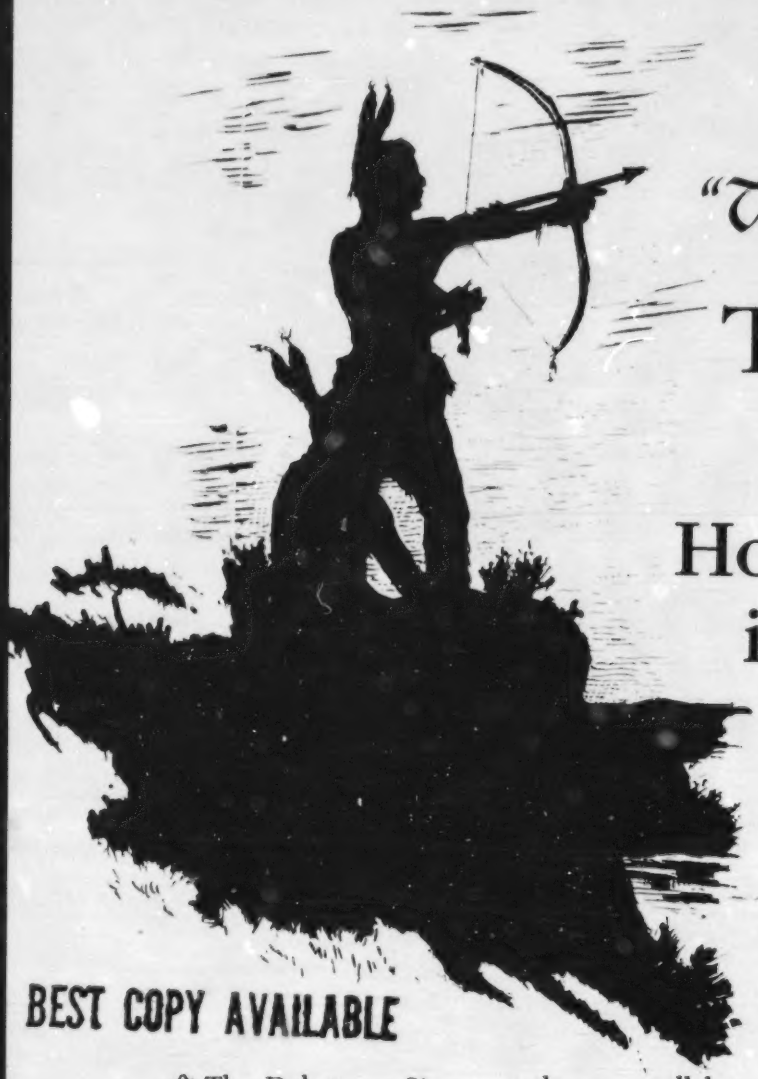

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"They were a people..."

The DAKOTA or SIOUX

How They Lived in the Early Days

The Dakota or Sioux people may well be the best known of all the nations which first lived in North and South America. Through movies, Wild West shows, paintings, and popular stories, they became so famous that today many people throughout the world think that the buffalo-hunting Sioux are the only "real" Indian people of the Americas. These horsemen of the plains, however, formed only one part of one Indian tribe. They were the western division of the Dakota nation.

Who were the Dakota? Why did they have two names? How did they live, and where? Let us look at some answers to these questions.

First the matter of names. The name which the members of this tribe gave themselves was **Dakota** – a good name, meaning friends or allies. Their Minnesota neighbors, the Ojibway or Chippewa, called them by a long name meaning enemy. French traders in the 1600s took the last part of that name and wrote it down as **Sioux.** Since then, both names – Dakota and Sioux – have been used.

WHERE THE DAKOTA PEOPLE LIVED

Where did the Dakota make their homes? This question needs a longer answer. When the explorer Daniel Du Luth came to the Minnesota country in the late 1600s, he found many Dakota people living in the northern forests and along the Upper Mississippi. They traveled over the waters by canoe then, and lived off the plants and animals of the forest. One of their big villages stood on the shore of Mille Lacs Lake.

Even at that time, however, some members of the tribe had moved out of the woods onto the nearby prairie and were living in what is now southern and western Minnesota. Throughout the 1700s, the Dakota bands moved westward, one by one, onto the open grasslands. Some of them may have left the forest in search of game or other food. Many were pushed out by the Ojibway. Those enemies, coming from

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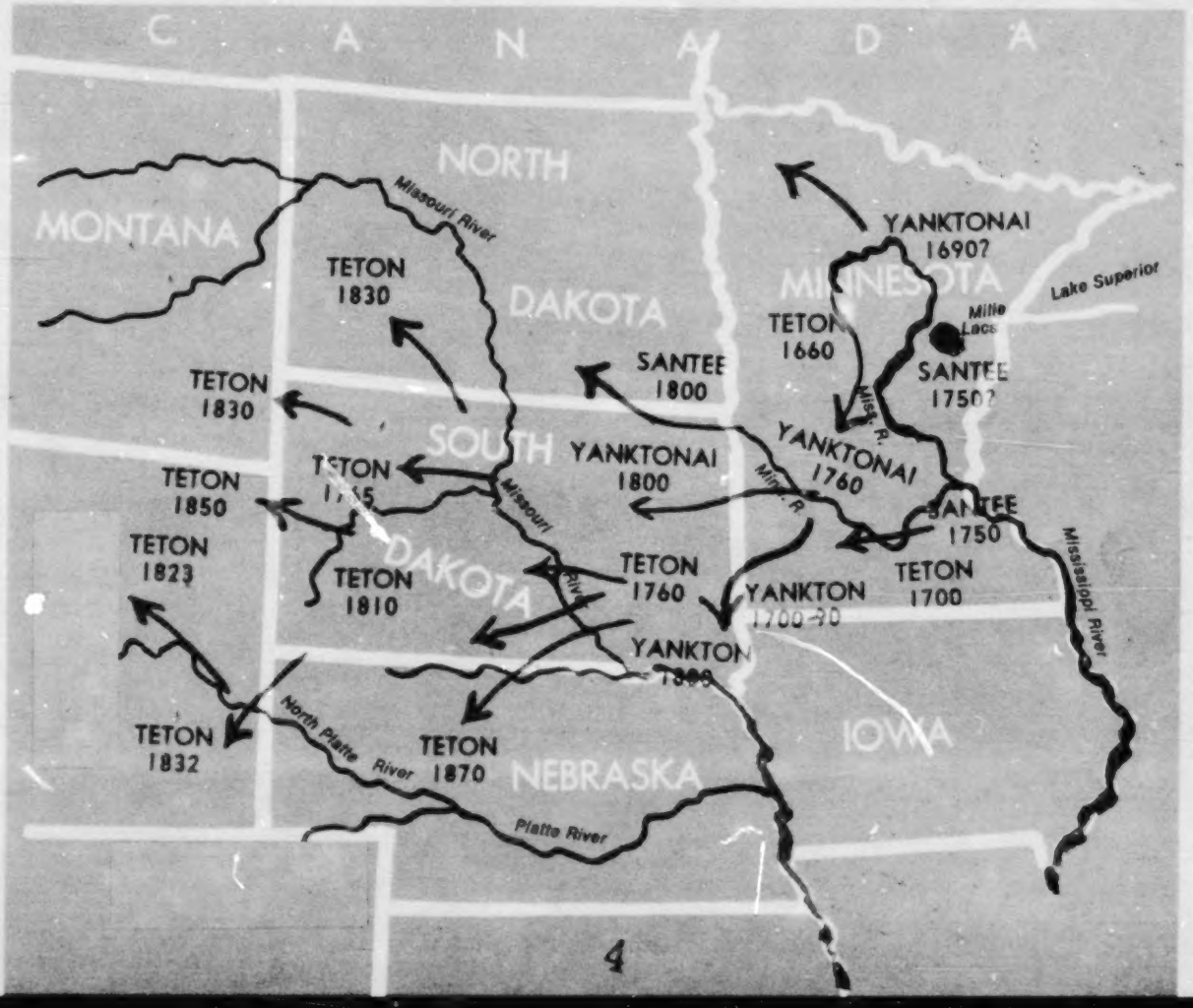
the east, were stronger than the Sioux. They had obtained guns from the French traders and explorers, while the Dakota still had only bows and arrows.

The first Dakota people to leave the forest were probably the Teton. Their name means prairie dweller. By the mid-1700s, small bands of Teton had crossed the Red River and were exploring the wide western plains, looking for buffalo. They did not yet have horses. When they moved from place to place, they carried their belongings on their backs or tied them to wooden frames harnessed to dogs. These frames, called travois (trav wah'), are pictured on page 12. Their shelter, later the lodge used by all the Dakota, was the tepee. This cone-shaped dwelling was a frame of poles with a covering of tanned buffalo skins.

The Teton Dakota still thought of the Minnesota country as their home at that time. Many returned to the trading fairs which were held on the Minnesota River each summer. Still the Teton peoples kept moving westward, following the buffalo. Soon after 1750 they came to the Missouri River. By that time they were using horses, which they obtained in trade with tribes to the south or captured in wild herds on the plains. The men rode horses on their buffalo hunts. The families also rode when they traveled from one campsite to another. They built large travois which they harnessed to the horses to haul their tepees and other baggage.

While the Teton were becoming buffalo hunters on the plains, the Dakota bands farther

Home of the Dakota Indians. This map shows where the Dakota people made their homes from about 1660 until the late 1800s. In the mid-1600s they lived in the northern forests. During the next two centuries they spread out westward, until their hunting grounds reached almost to the Rocky Mountains. The tribe then formed three big divisions. The eastern division was known as the Santee; the middle division was divided into the Yankton and Yanktonai; the western division was called the Teton. The dates show where the divisions lived at different times.



east were also moving out onto the prairie to live. By the late 1700s all the Sioux had left their forest homes in what is now northern Minnesota. Their campsites were scattered across the grasslands from the eastern Red River Valley, as far as the western plains along the Missouri.

Then the tribe had three big divisions – the eastern, middle, and western. The Eastern Dakota were the four bands of the Santee. Long before 1800 they were living in what is now the southern two-thirds of Minnesota. By that time the two bands of the Middle Sioux – the Yankton and the Yanktonai – had moved into what are today southern North Dakota and southern South Dakota, and nearby parts of Iowa and Minnesota. The Western Sioux were the Teton, by far the largest division, with seven large bands. Their broad hunting grounds west of the Missouri reached from the plains north of the Black Hills down to the Platte River, and westward into present-day Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. The map on page 2 shows where each division of the tribe lived.

When the Dakota people lived together in the northern forests, during the 1600s, they all had the same kind of life. They built the same kinds of lodges; hunted, raised, and gathered the same kinds of foods; fought the same enemies; spoke the same language.

After the bands began to move out onto the plains, their way of life slowly changed. By 1800 the three big divisions had long made their homes in different kinds of country. Each division had neighbors with different customs, and the life of each division had grown to be different from that of the others.

We can understand some of these changes when we look at how each division spent the four seasons of the year.

The life of each division of the Dakota people had a very well-ordered pattern, depending on the natural surroundings of their homes – the land, the plants and animals, and the weather during the four seasons.

Each band of the three divisions had regular camping places on their hunting grounds, well-established routes of travel, and definite work during each time of the year.

THE SEASONS OF THE SANTEE DAKOTA

When the first signs of spring came, the Santee, in their winter homes, began to get ready for the annual maple-sugar making. While snow was still on the ground the families took down their skin-covered lodges and moved, with all their belongings, to a nearby maple grove. The move was usually made with the help of dogs as pack animals. Even in later times the Santee had few horses.

When a group journeyed, the people carried along everything they owned. The poles and covers of the tepees would be tied to the dogs, and bundles were piled on the travois. Everyone who could carried burdens. In this way they traveled over the prairie, one after another. Everyone had his place in the long line of march; no one tried to hurry and push ahead of others. The procession was led by some of the older men, members of the village council. They decided which route to follow, when to stop and rest, and where to camp each night. The leaders were chosen for their long experience, their proven abilities, and their concern for the welfare of the people. They saw to it that every person in the band was taken care of. Most of the young men did not travel with the village, for they had to be out hunting for

Dakota families traveling. Household goods and other possessions were carried on the horse-drawn travois when the bands moved from one village site to another. This water color was painted in the mid-1800s by Seth Eastman, who was then an officer at Fort Snelling.

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game. However, if the families went through dangerous country, the leaders appointed armed braves to go along and be on the lookout for enemy attacks.

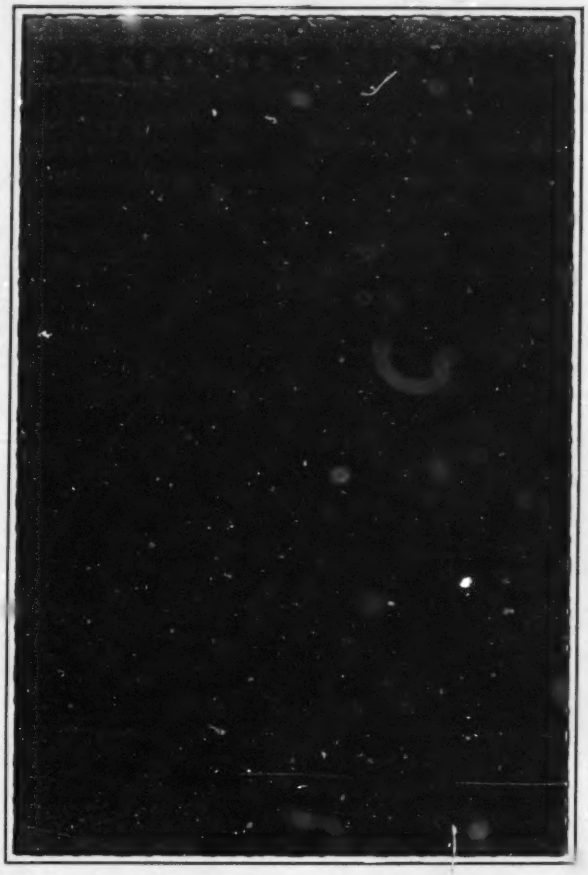
The travelers stopped each night at a place where the hunters had agreed to meet them. If the men then came bringing venison or bear meat at the end of the day, there was great rejoicing. Soon meat was roasting at every tepee fire. If the hunters came empty-handed, all might have to go to bed hungry. Usually the people continued their journey the next day. Sometimes, if they had stopped in a pleasant place, the leaders would decide that they should stay for a few days and rest.

Even though it meant hard work, everyone enjoyed moving camp. It was exciting to be on the go, to see new scenes, perhaps come across friends and relatives one had not seen for many months.

When the Santee families reached the maple grove, they set up their lodges, unpacked their belongings, and settled down to stay for some weeks. Everyone in camp helped with the sugar making. The women and older men did the hard work, but the boys and girls helped, too. First the people had to clean out the big, bark-covered sugar house, where they lived during the spring. Then they looked for birch bark out of which they made small containers to hold the sap.

When the sap began to rise, the women went through the grove, striking each tree with an ax and sticking a little chip of wood into the cut. The sweet juice, trickling down the chip was caught in the small bark container which was set under it. The boys and girls had to run back and forth emptying the containers into a large, clean hollowed log where the sap was collected before being boiled down.

The children had much fun at sugar-making time. When the boys were not carrying wood for the fires, they hunted squirrels and other small game. When the boiling sap began to thicken in the kettles, the children dropped



spoonfuls of it onto the snow, where it would harden into delicious sugar. If the sap was plentiful, the children were allowed to eat all the sugar they wanted.

During this time the young men were out hunting moose, deer, elk, and other game. The families had to have fresh meat every day, for there was little else for them to eat at that time of year.

When the weather grew warmer and sugar making was done, the families broke camp and again started on the march. This time they journeyed to their summer campsite. There, many groups came together who had spent the winter separately in small camps. In summer the Santee lived in large gabled bark-covered houses. These houses, something like summer cottages of today, stood empty during the winters. They were cool and comfortable. Many

Scene in the Sioux village of Kaposia about 1850. Kaposia stood near the present site of South St. Paul. Bark houses like those shown here were occupied mainly in summer. The painting was made by Seth Eastman.

View of the inside of a Dakota bark house. A low platform around the edge of the room was covered with furs. There people slept or sat, and children played. Furs, snowshoes, leggings, a drum, and other objects hang from the poles. The drawing was made by Robert O. Sweeny in the 1850s.

had porches, where the people would sleep on hot nights, and sit to rest during the day. Pictures of summer houses are shown above. Each house was big enough for a dozen or more people — young men and their wives, children, grandparents, uncles and aunts. Summer life was pleasant for the Santee, even though all had to work hard.

As soon as the wild strawberries began to bloom, the women planted patches of corn and made gardens where they raised pumpkins, beans, melons, and other food plants. When they were not busy with gardening or housekeeping, the Santee women sat together in their bark houses or in the shade, chatting and doing handwork. They made carrying cases out of rawhide and decorated them with bright painted designs. From hides which they had tanned, they made knife sheaths, quivers, pipe bags, and clothing. They made shirts and leggings for the men out of deerskin. They made dresses for themselves out of elk skin, which was a creamy white and as soft as velvet. Children's clothes were made from the skins of fawns.

The women made moccasins for every member of the band. These were soft-soled, for walking noiselessly over moss, pine needles, or dry leaves. Busy as they were, the women spent much time decorating clothes and other articles with beautiful embroidery done with dyed porcupine quills, shells, and bits of dyed swan's-down or other feathers.

The men went out on the hunt every day to provide food for their families. They hunted singly or by twos and threes if they were hunting bear, beaver, or any game they would not find in herds. Sometimes at nightfall they would return, one by one, each carrying the carcass of a deer or other animal on his back. If game was scarce, the hunters might travel for days and find nothing. Then they would arrive back in the village worn-out and very hungry.

Besides keeping the village supplied with meat every day during the summer, the hunters had to kill enough game so that meat could be stored up for winter. Every summer the Santee held several buffalo hunts, even though buffalo were not so plentiful in their country as farther west, where the other Dakota peoples lived.

When a scout returned to a Santee village with the news that a herd of buffalo had been seen, the village council at once organized the men for a large, communal hunt. In going after buffalo, skilled huntsmen had to work together. It took many men to surround and kill a herd.

After the animals had been killed, a runner was sent back to tell the families in the village. They then moved out to the spot. After they had arrived and made camp, all the people feasted happily together, giving thanks first to the Great Spirit for the food they had received. After the men had skinned and butchered the animals, the women set to work to cut up the meat and dry it on racks in the sun. Then it could be stored for the future. The women also prepared the hides, bones, sinews, and other parts for various uses. Meanwhile the men again departed for the hunt.

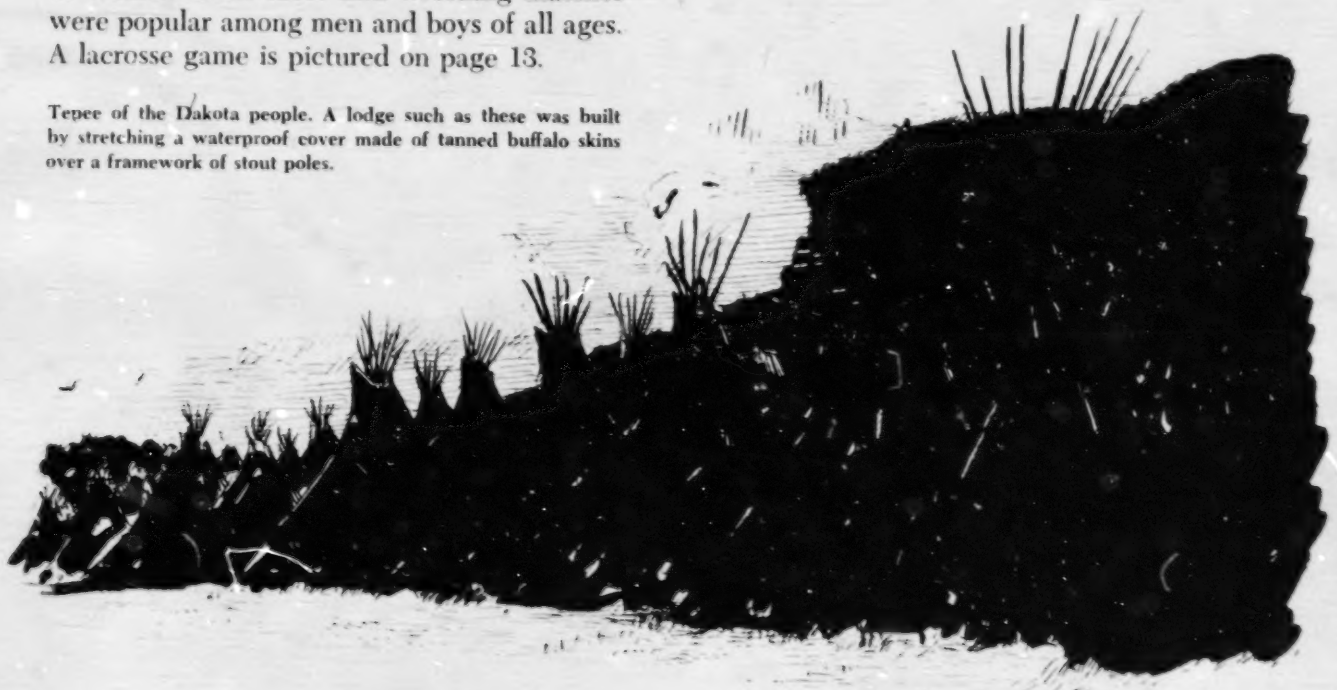
When food was plentiful and the days were long, the Santee people had many joyful gatherings. Like their cousins living farther west, they loved to meet in large assemblies during the summer. The lodges of many bands would form a large circle on the prairie. Many kinds of celebrations were held at such times. There were solemn religious dances, such as the famous Sun Dance, also feasting and much singing. The group held sports events much as we might today. A lacrosse game played between teams from two villages was an event of great excitement. Some games were played between teams of women. Foot races and wrestling matches were popular among men and boys of all ages. A lacrosse game is pictured on page 13.

In autumn the Santee gathered their crops. If the summer village stood in a region where there were rice lakes, the families traveled to one of the lakes to reap the wild rice which grew along the shores. This grain was an important part of their food.

The ricing camp remained at the lake several weeks. Before starting the harvest, the men and women built birch-bark canoes in which to go out and bring back the grain. When the canoes were finished, the people set them on the water with a ceremony of offerings and prayers for a good harvest.

Everyone helped with the ricing work. It was often the young women who paddled through the watery fields and knocked the ripe kernels from the grain heads into the bottom of the canoes. They did not take all, but left some for the birds, and made sure that some kernels fell into the water as seed for next year's crop. The young men usually hulled the rice after it had been dried.

Many kinds of activity went on at the ricing camps. The council always appointed some of the men to shoot waterfowl, hunt, and fish for the daily needs of the camp. Since berries grew



Tepee of the Dakota people. A lodge such as these was built by stretching a waterproof cover made of tanned buffalo skins over a framework of stout poles.

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in rice country, the women and children picked and dried them for the winter. Not the tiniest bit of food was ever wasted by the Dakota homemakers.

Social events such as feasts, dances, and canoe races also took place at harvesttime. Knowing that the long, dark winter was not far away, the people wanted to enjoy a few more happy times with their friends before the warm days ended.

When the rice was hulled and ready, each family stored its portion in little underground pits lined with bark and grass. There the grain would be kept until many months later, when food was scarce.

After the ricing was finished, it was time to return to the summer campsite to pick the corn and gather beans, squash, pumpkins, and other vegetables from the gardens. All the food must be dried, packed up, or in some other way made ready for winter.

Soon the winds were too cold for the people to stay in their bark houses; it was time to break camp and move once more. The village divided the corn, vegetables, dried meat, fur robes, and other supplies. Then they separated into small groups of a few families each and traveled to their winter homes.

The winter camp was usually set up in a wooded strip of bottom land along a river. There each family could find water and fuel wood, and the dwellings would be sheltered from the cold winds.

Winter was a time of quiet family life. The men hunted, often on snowshoes, and fished through the ice. Boys and girls went sliding on toboggans which their fathers made for them out of buffalo ribs, and played games on the ice and snow. To keep warm, the people wore their robes and moccasins with the fur inside. The women cared for their families, cooked the food, and made clothes and other articles from hides they had tanned during the summer.

When they were not hunting or trapping, the men made or repaired their bows and arrows, and recalled with their friends the adventures of the summer past. On wintry evenings, all sat on furs around the lodge fires while the old men told stories about heroes and battles of the nation's history.

HOW THE MIDDLE DAKOTA SPENT THE SEASONS

We have seen how the Santee or Eastern Dakota spent the four seasons of the year. Now let us see how the Middle Dakota lived. They made their homes farther west, and for this reason their seasonal work differed from that

A sled or toboggan made of buffalo ribs, on which Dakota boys and girls slid down the snowy hills in winter.

of their Santee cousins. Like the Santee, the Middle Dakota left their wintering campsites when spring came. There were no maple groves on their lands, and so they did not spend part of the spring making maple sugar. Instead, they moved their camps out onto the prairie. There the women planted corn patches and vegetable gardens. The men, of course, went out every day on the hunt. The Middle Dakota had more horses than the Santee, and could travel farther and faster. With the help of travois, they could carry heavier burdens. Since a horse can carry longer tepee poles and heavier tepee covers than a dog, the Middle Sioux lived in larger tepees than the Santee.

Like all the Sioux people, the middle division of the tribe enjoyed large assemblies each summer. On such occasions the councils of the bands met to decide matters governing the nation. Like the other divisions, the Middle Dakota held midsummer religious ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance, feasts, and celebrations. They also enjoyed sports, such as lacrosse games, races, and handball. Both men and women, as well as children, took part in these activities.

Young hunters joined forces for large, communal buffalo hunts both in midsummer and in late fall. The middle division also hunted deer, elk, bear, antelope, and smaller game. But their main food was provided by the buffalo.

The Middle Dakota lived in tepees and in rounded lodges, but both kinds of houses were covered with skins. There were few trees in their lands, and they had no bark-covered houses. To cool their home in summer, each family would raise the bottom of the tepee cover and fasten it up by means of little forked sticks. Then the cool breezes could blow through. One part of the middle division peoples sometimes built rounded earth lodges, which were not movable.

When traveling on lakes and rivers, the Middle Dakota used a craft called the bullboat. It was a round framework of willow, with buffalo skins stretched over it. This tublike boat was

Hunting buffalo in winter. When ice formed on deep snow the hunters could walk over the crust wearing snowshoes, while the buffalo would sink in and could easily be killed. The artist is Peter Rindisbacher.

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hard to steer and rather awkward. But it was watertight and was made of materials which could be found in their lands.

The clothing of the Middle Dakota was made of deerskin and other leather and was very much like that of the Santee. One important difference in their clothes was that the middle division often wore hard-soled moccasins, which of course were better for walking over the burrs and stubble sometimes found on the dry plains.

When winter approached, the Middle Dakota, like the Santee, separated into small groups and moved to sheltered places such as valleys or ground protected by overhanging cliffs.

SEASONAL LIFE OF THE TETON SIOUX

The Teton were the Dakota people who lived on the wide, treeless plains of the West. The great herds of buffalo which roamed the earth there provided for most of their needs. The Teton lived almost entirely off these animals. This gave them a special way of life.

Except in winter, the Teton were almost always on the move, following the herds. After about 1750, the horse was their means of travel. Riding fast horses, the hunters followed the herds. The women and children and old people also rode horses, as they moved from one village site to another. Their possessions were loaded onto pack horses or tied on horse-drawn travois. After horses came into common use among the Teton, there were usually enough in each village so that every person had one to ride. All the Teton were excellent riders; riding was part of their lives. When crossing lakes and streams, they used bullboats, like the Middle Dakota.

Like the other divisions of the Dakota people, the Teton moved from their winter camps onto the plains in spring. There they could find

Drying buffalo meat. After a hunt, when the men had slaughtered and skinned the buffalo, the women cut the meat into thin strips and dried it in the sun or over a fire. It would then keep for a long time without spoiling.

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fresh grass for their horses. There, too, they were joined by other Teton groups, coming from their winter homes. Spring was a happy time of reunion with friends and relatives whom they had not seen for many months. But there was little time for visiting at that season of the year. Supplies were low, and the leaders were concerned about getting food for the people. And so they soon organized hunting parties to provide fresh meat.

As spring turned into summer, the men carried out the big buffalo hunts for which the Teton were justly famous. Such great hunts could be held because the herds were huge, the plains were almost endlessly wide, and the horses of the Teton were very swift. Besides, each man was a highly skilled hunter who acted fearlessly, with no thought for his life or safety. Working together, a large number of hunters would surround a herd and either drive the animals over a cliff or shoot them one by one with bows and arrows.

The Western Dakota planted few crops. The climate in their homeland was too dry for agriculture, and they were on the move too often to be able to care for fields and gardens. But they did find and use the wild plants which grew on the plains. Some of these were the wild onion, a food which was like the potato, and a turniplike vegetable. Among the delicious fruits of the plains were strawberries, gooseberries, grapes, plums, and the sweet, red prickly pear.

Having horses made it possible for the Teton to travel far, especially during the summer. Parties of men searched the plains to find wild horses and bring them back for their herds. Groups of families sometimes traveled many days distant to woodlands, to cut tepee poles. Or they visited the neighboring peoples to exchange meat or furs for grain, pottery, or other products. Groups of Teton families also journeyed to the Minnesota country to visit their eastern relatives and perhaps go to the sacred quarry to get red stone for making pipes.

Digging roots on the plains. The western division of the Dakota lived mostly off the buffalo, and planted few crops. They did, however, gather several kinds of roots, berries, and other wild plants which grew on their hunting grounds.

The most important part of each summer for the Teton Dakota families was the tribal gathering. Coming together from all directions, they met at an appointed spot, setting up their tents in a giant circle. Many kinds of events took place at these grand summer encampments. The tribal council met to discuss and decide matters of government and the welfare of the people. Feasts were given and celebrations held. Games were played between teams, with large crowds of spectators cheering on the side lines. Exciting races were held with fleet-footed horses. Target-shooting contests were held, where men tested their skill with bow and arrow. Foot races and wrestling matches took place.

For all these occasions, the people dressed in their best clothes – painted buffalo robes, gaily colored moccasins, and much jewelry. Many of the men dressed in fringed leggings and shirts ornamented with ermine skins.

Acknowledgement

Clothes, pipe bags, quivers, and other articles were gaily embroidered with dyed porcupine quills in colorful geometric designs. The women wore dresses of finest white elk skins, ornamented with fringes and embroidery. Earrings and necklaces of silver, shell, or stones were worn by all who had them. Men who had won honors in battle wore their eagle feathers. Warriors who had earned the right had on ceremonial war bonnets.

The greatest event of the annual Teton gathering was the Sun Dance. It was this deeply religious rite – the most important in the life of each Dakota – which brought the bands together in midsummer. The ceremony, which lasted several days, was a prayer of the whole nation to God. It united the people and renewed their union with the Great Spirit – the giver of life. Each person, young and old, took part in it in some way. When the solemn rite was ended, all could depart for their homelands feeling that they had once more fulfilled their sacred duty.

In late fall, many of the Teton bands held more buffalo hunts, to add to their stores of dried meat for the winter. When the cold wind began to sweep down from the north, the people had to leave the plains. They split up into small groups of a few families each and withdrew into canyons or to wooded strips along the rivers. A wintering place which the Teton especially loved was the Black Hills. There they could find wood for fuel, fresh water in springs and little lakes, and shelter beneath the dark pines. Bushes and shrubs in the low places provided fodder for the horses. Buffalo and other animals also wintered in the Black Hills, making it possible for the men to find game without going out on the plains. It was dangerous to roam far when the snow was deep and storms threatened. Yet even in the great cold, the men went out on the daily hunt, for there was always danger that the food would not last until spring, and the men had great concern for their families.

In most respects the Teton people, like the other divisions of the Sioux, lived a quiet life during the winter, waiting for spring to return.

A PEOPLE OF DIGNITY

Even after they had been widely scattered for a hundred years, the three divisions of the Dakota people still looked on each other as relatives; they lived in peace with one another; and they still spoke similar dialects. In many important ways the people of the three divisions remained very much alike.

Buffalo grazing on the plain. Sometimes the buffalo scattered as shown here. At other times the animals of a giant herd would crowd so close together that, from a distance, it looked as though the earth was covered with a rough, brown blanket. The artist is Del Stanley.

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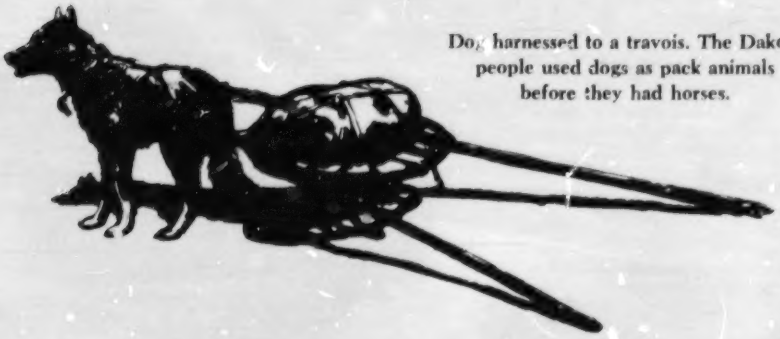

Dog harnessed to a travois. The Dakota people used dogs as pack animals before they had horses.

Most books and movies do not give a true picture of these first Americans, but show them only as a warlike nation. Let us look at some of the daily activities of the Dakota people which are not usually described, and see what their way of life can teach us.

The first thing that a stranger or a visitor in a Dakota village might notice is that the people were quiet and dignified. The grown-ups were courteous to each other. Shouting and rough talk were seldom heard among them. Older men sitting in council took turns speaking and did not interrupt each other. Children paid respect to older people, not only because they were told to, but – as we shall see – because they felt love and affection for them.

Yet in spite of being dignified, both men and women had a good sense of humor. When they were among friends, they often laughed and were gay. And they loved to play jokes on each other.

The artist, Frank B. Mayer, who visited the Santee village of Kaposia (located where South St. Paul now stands) in the early 1800s, described one of the chiefs as a man "of determined and ambitious nature, yet very gentle and dignified. His face is full of intelligence when he is in conversation, and his whole bearing is that of a gentleman." The Sioux women he saw were so modest and shy that they would not let him paint their pictures. After staying for some time in a Dakota village, the artist wrote of the people, "I have seldom met with . . . persons who had such genuine politeness, gentlemanly feeling, and kindliness of manner."

Two examples of travois (above). Small travois were built to be pulled by dogs. Large ones were harnessed to horses. The bullboat (below) was made by stretching a covering of buffalo skins over a round frame made of willow poles.

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A team of Dakota men playing lacrosse. The Sioux enjoyed this game much as Americans today love baseball. The match pictured here, which was played at Traverse des Sioux on the Minnesota River, was painted by Frank B. Mayer.

IN THE TEPEE

The center of life for all the Dakota people was the tepee, which was mentioned earlier. The family tepee, which might be 15 or 20 feet across, was very skillfully designed. It could be quickly pitched and as quickly taken down. It was light enough to be moved from one camping place to another, and it was made of materials that could be found in the Dakota homelands. Tepees are pictured on pages 6 and 9.

Even though it was simply built and light in weight, the tepee was comfortable in all kinds of weather and would stand firm against a very strong wind. It was handsome besides. The skins of the cover were carefully tanned, and when new they were white. They let enough light through, so that in the daytime the lodge was not dark inside. A circle of white Dakota tepees was a beautiful sight in the evening. The small fires inside turned them into softly glowing cones, while the smoke drifted up from each against the darkening sky. It was a homelike scene, and a welcome sight to men returning weary from the hunt.

Inside, each tepee was arranged in an orderly fashion. The fire in the center was enclosed in a circle of stones. The rest of the floor was covered with thick furs, often laid down over a layer of dried grass.

Around the fire, each member of the family had his regular place, and never sat, ate, or slept anywhere else when he was in the lodge. The place at the back, opposite the doorway, was the seat of honor. There the father of the family sat, or sometimes an older, honored guest. The mother's place was just inside the door, at the right side. The daughters and other women of the household sat on the mother's side of the lodge. The sons and any other men sat on the father's side.

At each one's place, the mother laid a robe for covering at night, as well as the person's clothes and other belongings. Some of the articles she might put into rawhide cases which hung from the tepee poles. When the camp was settled for a rather long stay, as for winter, she would set up a little back rest for each person.

The mother did this, for the family tepee belonged to her. It was she who tanned the hides and sewed the cover, set up the lodge and took it down, and made all the arrangements inside.

The Dakota lodge was a quiet place. No quarreling or loud talk was heard in it. Since there was little space, each person behaved in such a way that he bothered the rest as little as possible. Everyone was careful to respect the rights of others. No one stared at others or even looked to see what they were doing. In that way each person had some privacy.

Embroidered buckskin articles. The Dakota women decorated knife sheaths, pipe bags, moccasins, quivers, and many other objects which they made of tanned skins. The beautiful designs were usually made with brightly dyed porcupine quills.

THE "LARGER FAMILY"

Because they depended on each other so closely, the Dakota people had to work out ways by which they could help each other and live happily together. One way they did this was through a kind of family relationship – a kind that we do not have. Besides the usual family of father, mother, and children, the Dakota people had a wider relationship which might be called a "larger family."

In this larger family, every child said **Father** not only to his real father but also to his father's brothers and to his father's men cousins. He said **Mother** not only to his real mother but also to her sisters and to her women cousins. This meant that every child had many fathers and mothers. Perhaps a dozen or more of each. The children of all these "fathers" and "mothers" were his brothers and sisters. And their grandparents all were his grandparents. The relationship went on, further, to cousins, aunts, uncles, and married relatives. In that way each person in the village belonged to a very large family.

Woman's dress of tanned skins. The finest dress for a woman was made of two tanned elk skins—one forming the back, the other the front.

Among the many things which every Dakota child learned, early in life, was the exact way that he was related to each person in this larger family. Whenever he spoke to anyone he must use the person's title – such as father, mother

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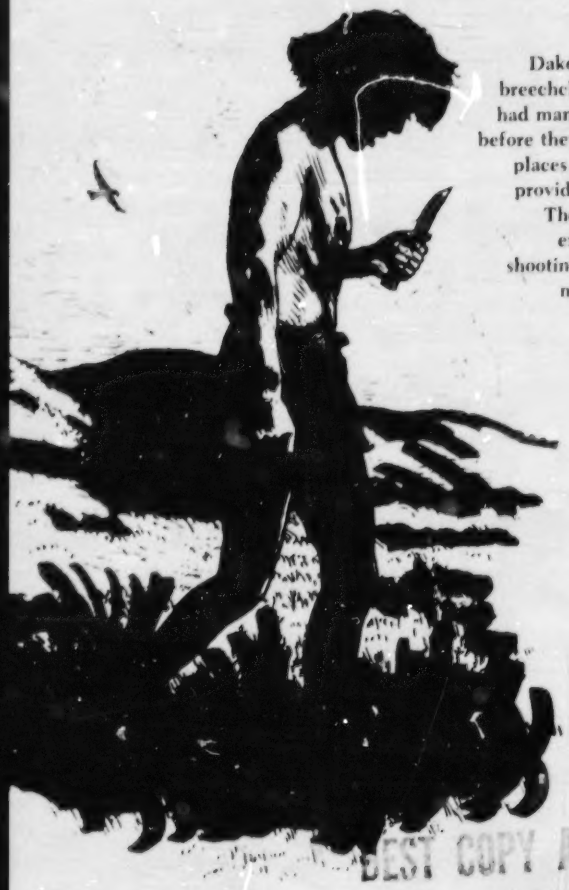

Dakota boy wearing a breechcloth. Dakota boys had many lessons to learn before they could take their places as protectors and providers of the people. They had to become experts in hunting, shooting, riding, weapon making, and many other skills.

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uncle, grandfather, and so on — as well as the name. He, in turn, was called brother, sister, grandson, nephew, or whatever word was correct for the person who was talking to him. The child's brothers and sisters were his equals and he treated them as such. His parents and grandparents were given respect which was never neglected. Each other kind of relative was honored in a certain way, which was also very important.

This way of life seems strange to people who are used to living in small family groups. But some very good things resulted from it. As a member of this large relationship, each Dakota child grew up in a close-knit group. When he played in the village, he was at home and welcome in every tepee. He was safe. Every grownup person would look after him, talk with him, give him food if he asked for it. He never felt lonely, left out, or unwanted.

In this way, too, every boy and girl associated closely with people of many ages while he was still very young. Throughout life he was better able to get along with people, because he did so, early in life, in the larger family.

TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO LIVE

From the time that children were eight or nine, they had the companionship of their elders. They learned as much from the examples of the grownups as by following rules. Boys were looked on as future providers and protectors of the people. Girls were the future mothers of warriors. Each person, young and old, was considered important for the welfare of all. Each one depended on the rest for survival.

Perhaps this is why Dakota parents almost never punished a child, or even spoke crossly to him. If he did something wrong, they corrected him gently. Of course, wherever a Dakota child turned he would find a parent, grandparent, older brother, or other close relative ready to teach him what was correct.

As the child grew, he began to give as well as receive. He felt respect and concern for those older and younger than himself, helping them as he was able. For this reason, the old, the very young, the sick, and others who needed help were well cared for among all the Dakota people. Perhaps for this reason also, there was very little crime among them.

HARD LESSONS TO LEARN

Even though the Dakota children were not punished or treated harshly, they had many hard lessons to learn before they could take their places as men and women. Boys had to learn man's work: finding and tracking game; shooting straight, under the most difficult conditions; skinning and slaughtering game; becoming expert riders; making weapons; taking care of horses; and other skills. The girls must learn woman's work: finding and preparing foods; building and caring for the lodge; making clothes; tanning hides, and other tasks.

The most important lessons, however, were much harder than these. Because the life of the Dakota people was filled with hardships, the parents had to teach their children to be strong and self-reliant. Above all, each one had to learn to do his part and to be concerned for the welfare of others. Qualities which were prized most highly were generosity, self-control, and bravery. As a child grew, and gained these qualities, he was learning to behave as a valued member of the Dakota people.

Generosity meant sharing and giving. Food and other necessities had to be shared if the tribes were to live. Rice from the harvest, berries, corn, and other foods were divided, as was the meat which was brought home from the hunt. In times when there was much food, everyone had enough. When there was none, all were alike hungry. When there was a little food it would be given to the old, the sick, and very small children. Hoarding and grabbing were looked down upon among the Dakota. People who only looked out for themselves were considered useless and a burden. The leaders among the Dakota were those who were concerned that all in a village were taken care of as well as possible.

Self-control was taught to children almost from the time they were babies. A child must not cry at night, for it might lead an enemy scout to the village. A wounded hunter, hidden in tall grass, did not make a sound, no matter how much pain he suffered, for it might frighten away game which others were following. As they grew up, Dakota children saw their elders bear every kind of pain without giving any outward sign. They learned that, for the safety of the people, they must be able to do likewise.

But the Dakota did more than to accept suffering. The men, especially, were taught to go forward and meet it. The single trait in which the Dakota ranked highest and for which they were famous, was bravery. The men continually risked their lives in hunting and in fighting enemies. A Dakota brave would face anything if it was necessary in order to feed and protect his tribe. He willingly gave his life for his people. A song which was sung by young braves when they became members of one of the warrior groups, the Kit-Fox society, shows how they felt:

"I am a Fox,
I am supposed to die.
If there is anything hard
If there is anything dangerous,
That is mine to do."

LEARNING TO GO HUNGRY

A strange, hard lesson for the children was that they must learn to go hungry. Dakota parents would encourage a child to fast or go without food, at first for one day, later for two days, and then longer. This was done again and again as boys and girls grew up. Children who were fasting blackened their faces with burnt wood

Dakota girls playing with a ball. Girls of the tribe learned women's work by helping their mothers and other women of the village. They had to learn how to build and care for the tepee, tan hides, make clothes, prepare food, and learn other homemaking arts.

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so that everyone might see that they were pledged to eat no food that day. At first a father or other adult would join the boy in fasting. Two brothers might fast together, sleeping in a little separate lodge which their parents had made for them. All Dakota men and women fasted many times throughout life. Fasting was also an important part of many religious rites.

There are reasons why it was important to learn to fast. Almost every year there was a starving time among the Dakota, when food from the year before did not last through the spring, or game could not be found. If a child had learned what it was like to be hungry, if he knew that he could endure it, and could do without food even when he could get it, then he was better able to bear this hardship, without weakening. Even without complaining. Later, in times of little food, he would without question give up his portion for those who were less able. A Dakota hunter might have to go without food for days when following a deer or an elk which was badly needed for food in the village. But he had learned to fast, and he did not turn back no matter how hungry he was.

Parents were very kind in teaching children their hard lessons. They were patient if the child was slow, and quickly rewarded him when he succeeded. But every child **must** learn each lesson. There could be no dropouts. One who did not learn would not last long as a hunter or warrior, and if he failed to do his part the tribe was weakened.

LIVING WITH NATURE

The life of the Dakota said that man is part of nature. The Sioux people felt a union with nature which a non-Indian would not be able to understand. Plants and animals, they believed, have as much right to live as man. Man may use them as gifts, to support his own life, but should never destroy needlessly. The Dakota were closely acquainted with the plant and animal world of their homeland, and spent

Spoons made from buffalo horns. A horn spoon was made by boiling a horn until it was soft, then shaping it over a smooth stone, and bending the handle. A large horn spoon was as big as a small bowl.

their lives learning its ways. At any season of the year they were never separated from the outdoors by more than the frail skin of the tepee.

When the white men entered their land, the Dakota people could not understand why the invaders tried to conquer nature instead of living in harmony with its laws. They were horrified at the white man's savage acts of killing thousands of buffalo and letting the carcasses rot on the plains. To them the buffalo were a gift from the Great Spirit, given to them so that they might live.

Even after the Dakota people had lived on the plains and prairies for many years, the land was still covered with a carpet of green grass, the air and waters were still pure and clean. Yet the white men who came called the region wild and a wilderness. After white men settled the land and built towns, the soil became eroded, the waters muddied, the air filled with dust. Whole species of birds and animals were wiped out or nearly destroyed, because men were greedy and wasteful and did not think of the future.

CONCLUSION

Before the white men came, the Dakota people lived a life that was orderly and well governed. It had hunger and hardship, but also beauty and joy. Most important, the people had worked out a life in which each one felt that he must be his brother's keeper. Only in that way could they live. It was a good way.

Books by DAKOTA Authors
About Their People

How can we learn about how the Dakota or Sioux peoples lived in the early days before the white men came? The first white men among them saw Indian life in its original state, but they understood little of what they saw. Also, they looked down on the Indian and did not appreciate his greatness. Although many white men have written books about Indians, much of what they have presented has been false.

The early Dakota or Sioux people themselves made no written records of their culture and life style. However, they carefully transmitted, from generation to generation, a knowledge of the tribal skills, customs, beliefs, and ways of thinking about God and the earth. Later, even after most of the Dakota had learned to use English, they continued to hand down to younger members of the tribe the great body of traditions about the early way of life which was the inheritance of all. Fortunately some of this oral tradition was written down by members who understood its importance and who feared that it might be lost forever. Such writings are our most valuable sources of information on the subject.

Three Dakota writers who have left us books telling about the early life of their people are Ella Deloria, Charles Alexander Eastman, and Chief Standing Bear.

Miss Deloria, a scholar in Indian languages, was born a Yankton Dakota but grew up among the Teton. Part Two of her book *Speaking of Indians* is a vivid description of how the Teton lived before their culture was changed by the coming of the white man. This moving and beautiful account the author says she pieced together from accounts which had been handed down by word of mouth for generations.

Charles Eastman, who lived earlier, was born in a tepee in western Minnesota in 1858, a Santee Dakota. As a result of the Sioux War, he and other Santee people were, in 1862, driven into exile in the wilds of Canada. There the boy lived the original nomadic life of his ancestors. He was given the stern training of an Indian youth and taught the high ideals of Dakota conduct. At 15 he was brought to the United States. Here he assumed his Indian mother's last name and adopted the given names of Charles Alexander. He learned English, attended several schools in the Midwest, then earned degrees from universities in the East. After graduating from the medical school of Boston University, he returned to South Dakota to serve his people for many years as physician, attorney, and counselor. In his numerous writings, Dr. Eastman tried to educate his white readers in the history of the Dakota and to correct some of the many false ideas they held about the first Americans. The Eastman books which have best served this end are: *Indian Boyhood, Old Indian Days, Wigwam Evenings, Red Hunters and the Animal People,* and *The Soul of the Indian.*

Standing Bear was born in 1869, a Teton or Lakota, on the plains of South Dakota and spent his boyhood years leading the traditional life of his tribe. Although he later left his Indian home to attend the white man's schools, Chief Standing Bear never departed from the high principles, thoughts, and values which shaped his early years. Like Dr. Eastman, he returned to his people to become their helper. In his writings he tried to present, as he said, "a message to the white race to bring my people before their eyes in a true and authentic manner." His four books, which go far to accomplish this purpose are: *My Indian Boyhood, My People the Sioux, Land of the Spotted Eagle,* and *Stories of the Sioux.*

Many of the books listed on this page were written for children. All would interest younger students if read aloud to them. Since most of the works were published early in the twentieth century, few can be found for sale today, except in secondhand stores. They should, however, be found in the public libraries, and in the larger school libraries, of Minnesota.

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